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Why is this band smiling?

**TALKING HEADS**

Solo projects completed,  
Talking Heads reassemble



**JIMMY DESTRI**  
A Blondie on his own  
**PETE SHELLEY**



# 4 HEADS 3 SOLO LPs 1 BAND

By Scott Isler  
Photos by Godlis



## “MAN BITES DOG!”

We all know that's news. But how about:

“TALKING HEADS STILL TOGETHER!”

See the problem? For seven years Talking Heads have been making the most innovative, challenging, enjoyable music ever to prove that your feet and brain can be entertained simultaneously—and they've been as newsworthy as taxes in April. No drug busts, no inflammatory onstage behavior, no social or personal outrages—how's a journalist supposed to *write* about these people, for crying out loud?

It seemed like the most sensational event anyone could chalk up to Talking Heads would be their temporary doubling in size for the 1980/81 **Remain in Light** tour: the basic Heads—singer/guitarist David Byrne, keyboard player/guitarist Jerry Harrison,



bassist Tina Weymouth and drummer Chris Frantz—added another guitarist, keyboard player and bassist, a percussionist and a couple more singers. The resulting whirl of music knocked virtually everyone who heard it for a loop. The expansion itself, violating rock's unwritten law about the sanctity of a band's personnel, was in keeping with Talking Heads' relentless creativity.

In retrospect, solo albums from such a group should have seemed inevitable. Byrne had already embarked on *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* with Heads producer Brian Eno before *Remain in Light* was recorded. Yet solo albums from rock band members are almost always viewed as signs of dissatisfaction—evidence that musicians can't get their ideas across within the give-and-take of a band format.

After the *Remain in Light* tour, Weymouth and Frantz went to the Bahamas to record an album of their own, Harrison got the solo bug in New York, and Byrne worked on material for choreographer Twyla Tharp. With all four members busy on solo projects, the situation looked volatile. Brian Eno lit the fuse.

Talking Heads have never tried to conceal their internal frictions. Even during the last tour they openly discussed the tensions that arose from what some members considered Byrne and Eno's unfair hogging of credit for *Remain in Light*. During the post-tour lull, though, Eno (then working on a solo LP of his own) made some comments that now sound disingenuous at best. "I don't know what state the group is in at the moment," he told the *New York Times*' Robert Palmer; Palmer added that the Heads "are not sure whether they want to continue as a four-piece rock band."

Now that's more like it! Strife! Division! Who cares that the Heads themselves protested they were still a band? The evidence indicated otherwise. The next Talking Heads album was slated to be a live set—always a stall tactic—and with everyone attending to their own records, group morale was obviously at a low ebb.

Sire Records, Talking Heads' label, spat out the three "solo Heads" albums within an eight-week period last fall: first the Weymouth/Frantz project, *Tom Tom Club*; then Jerry Harrison's *The Red and the Black*; and finally David Byrne's *Songs from the Broadway Production of "The Catherine Wheel."* By the time Byrne's record came out, though, the band was indeed back together, assembling the live album

and planning rehearsals for a studio LP—minus any extra Heads (a couple had appeared on *Remain in Light*) and minus Brian Eno.

The rock press' loss of a juicy "band split" story was the music world's gain. Only now the story became the story: Why *didn't* Talking Heads break up? How did the rumors start?

"Part of that might have been because Brian and I did the *Bush of Ghosts* record," Byrne says. "As soon as one person does a project apart from the band, rumors start."

"There are often quotes taken out of context that people can build up," Harrison believes. "It was a lot more interesting than reading that we went to art school."

"Somebody had gotten it into their heads that we were gonna split up," Frantz theorizes, "maybe by something somebody said at an interview."

"Eno said it!" Weymouth exclaims. "He said, 'I doubt if they'll ever play together again.' Who knows where he got that idea?"

You have just met Talking Heads. Now let's chat with David Byrne, Jerry Harrison, Tina Weymouth and Chris Frantz as individuals—and find out if there's any difference.

**DAVID** Byrne has resigned himself to being Talking Heads' frontman, and a more reluctant one would be hard to find in the ego-inflated rock world. Asked if he considers himself the Heads' leader, he drawls, "I guess so" and pauses for a considerable time before resuming. "I never liked to think of it as being that I would tell everyone what to do. I don't tell everyone what to do; it's not that kind of leadership."

David Byrne does not have what the Army would call leadership potential. Al-

though blessed with strong facial planes, his reedy thinness and demeanor conspire to give the impression of a man constantly questioning himself. He smokes nervously and speaks hesitantly; at 29 he is graying at the temples. Sunk into a stuffed swiveling armchair at Warner Bros. Records' New York offices (where all these interviews were held on separate occasions) and obscured up to his shoulders from the side, the tousle-haired Byrne eerily becomes a...talking head.

This unlikely candidate for rock stardom mesmerizes with talent rather than charisma. Byrne's quizzical lyrics and desperate vocals are emblematic of contemporary groping for meaning in life and society. He makes direct emotional connections the way that previous sentence didn't. Twyla Tharp, for one, recognized this talent; without meeting Byrne, she proposed last March that he score a performance for her Dance Foundation.

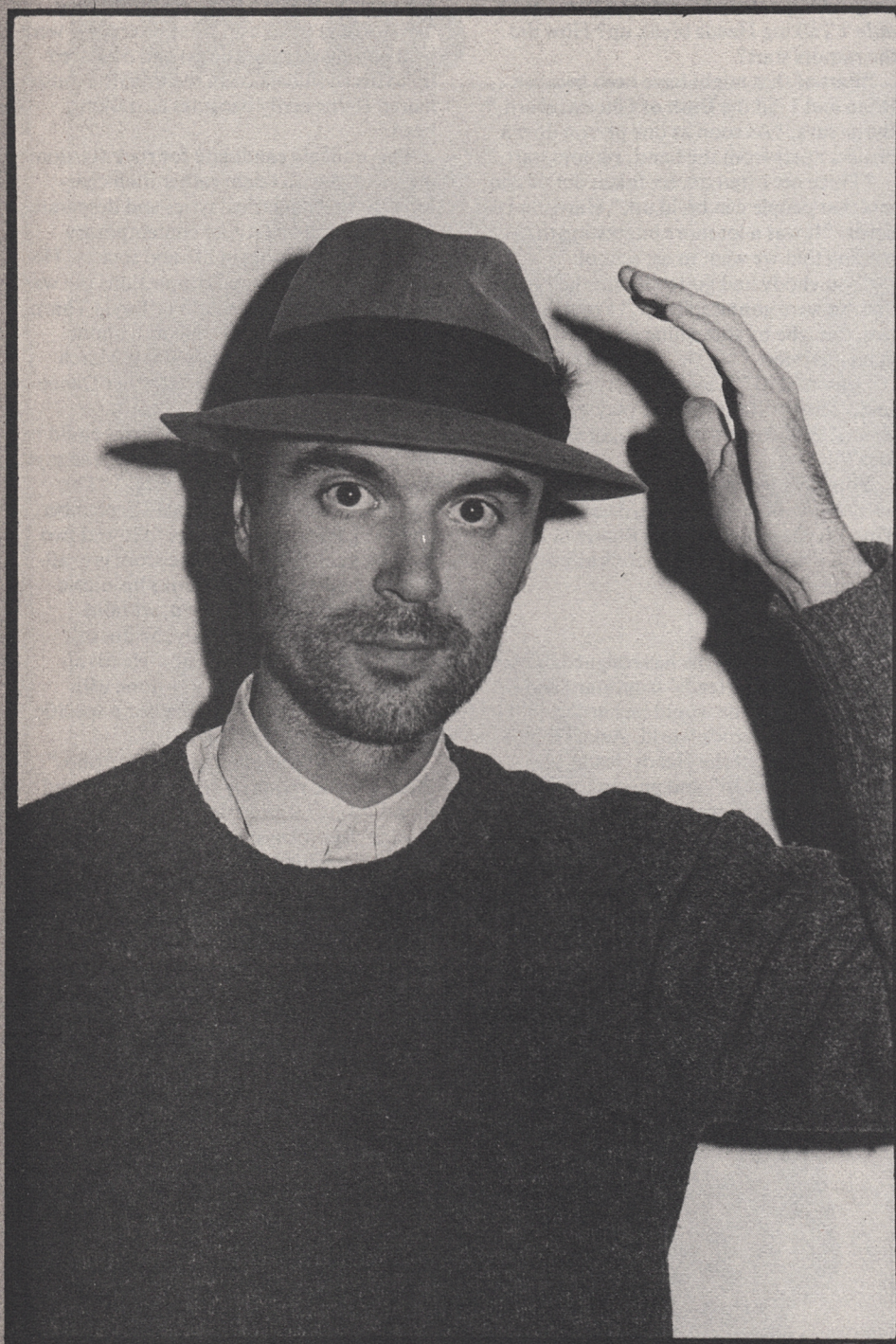
"I had been thinking about what could be done along those lines anyway," Byrne says, "so I jumped at the opportunity." "The Catherine Wheel" premiered last September, and the LP excerpt of *Songs* followed two months later. (The complete score is available on cassette.) Byrne thinks his music stands pretty well on its own, without Tharp's dance. Surprisingly, he doesn't consider either of his two non-Heads albums as solo LPs. "One was done with Brian and the other was done for a specific purpose, not to be an LP first."

Along with Tharp's "specific purpose" came specific requirements for tempo and mood. "I just started doing lots of pieces of music," Byrne says; he and Tharp then slotted them into sections of the dance. After "a good amount" of the dance had music to it, Byrne wrote specific music to order, filling in the gaps.



**Four for all: Harrison, Byrne, Weymouth and Frantz.**





*"You would think everyone would get real pushy when we got back together—but it hasn't happened that way."  
—David Byrne*

A lot of "The Catherine Wheel"'s score is instrumental, in contrast to Talking Heads' approach. "I don't think of Talking Heads as mainly an instrumental band," Byrne says. "I noticed [with 'The Catherine Wheel'] I could work on rhythms that were, to my mind, not suitable for social dancing—serious rhythms that made you move your body but not in a way people are used to doing in clubs. That wouldn't be appropriate with the band."

"The Catherine Wheel" score does have marked musical similarity to Byrne's collaboration with Eno, **My Life in the Bush of Ghosts**, that launched his infatuation with African rhythms. "'The Catherine Wheel' has a lot more African rhythms in it than **Remain in Light** or **Bush of Ghosts**. This was the culmination; now I can use it when it's appropriate instead of concentrating on it so much. I feel now I can assimilate some of those things and use them in a more natural way."

With the Heads back together rehearsing for a new album, Byrne feels everyone is much improved for their solo sprees. "It gave us time away from each other; we'd been touring together for so long. You see somebody every day and at some point you start getting annoyed at their little habits—like so-and-so scratches their ear every time they speak. Having spent some time away, those things become charming again."

"It also gave everybody in the group a little more confidence. You would think then that everyone would get real pushy when we all got back together—but it hasn't worked out that way."

Byrne considers his own solo work "pretty separate" from his band, and even thinks of himself as a Talking Head only depending "on what I'm doing at the time." He seems interested in his Headmates' albums, however. Harrison's LP he finds denser than even Talking Heads, while he admits being envious of Tom Tom Club ("the other extreme") "because the sound has so much space around it."

Maybe Byrne never appreciated the creative potential of the other Heads let loose on their own. Would he like to incorporate any of these "solo" musical aspects into Talking Heads?

"Sure, if they don't mind," he smiles.

**MOST** people take Byrne's dominance within Talking Heads for granted. These same people probably listened to Jerry Harrison's **The Red and the Black** and presumed any resemblance to Byrne or the Heads was strictly derivative.

"A lot of people have criticized Jerry and said he's parodying David," Tina Weymouth says. "Frankly, Jerry is Talking Heads; he's responsible for that sound. Jerry Harrison was playing the things people have assumed Brian Eno or David Byrne were doing. It's an unfair assumption that gets even more unfair when they go backwards and say that *he's* copying *them*."

"There's always attention paid to the lead



singer or major songwriter; that's inevitable," the 32-year-old Harrison states in his own behalf. "There are times when it's very annoying because you just know people are crediting somebody else with things you did." **The Red and the Black** isn't so much a declaration of independence as a public clarification.

Former Harvard student Harrison is both intelligent and, in conversation, eager to please. As he talks he gestures with his hands, shifts around in his chair, folds and unfolds arms and legs. Pensive and softspoken, he seems at pains to make his points clear.

"Every time you make a record you have ideas that you feel aren't expressed the way you wished. They evolve in a certain way when you record with a group of people. I had a lot of ideas I was looking forward to expressing. I wouldn't have felt bad if they had come through on a Talking Heads album, but there ended up being time to do it this way."

("Jerry has too many ideas," Tina Weymouth feels. "Instead of having two sides to the coin, Jerry wants you to look at the edge and say, 'See, there are 360 sides.'")

A solo album has its advantages, as Harrison found out. "It allowed me to do things I wouldn't normally be doing, like being totally responsible for the lyrics and singing—being more in control of everything, as well as taking the opportunity to work with other people."

"Other people" isn't as radical as it sounds: among Harrison's cohorts are guitarist Adrian Belew (now in King Crimson), Parliament/Funkadelic keyboard player Bernie Worrell, and singers Nona Hendryx and Dolette McDonald—all of whom appeared in the exploded Talking Heads. On his own album, though, Harrison has pushed the Heads' funk-rock considerably further in the areas of texture (as Byrne noted) and rhythmic complexity.

He admits his album may be too rich to absorb in just one listening. "I thought it could appeal to lots of people," he laughs, "but I'm probably wrong. I thought it's very diverse and would even appeal to heavy metal audiences [*Good luck, Jer.*—Ed.]; the guitar solo on 'Worlds in Collision' is much heavier-sounding than most of what I hear on radio. All the songs have great grooves to them—they're all really danceable—but I don't think they're easy to hear 'cause they're not all played with straight bass/drum. The patterns are a little more... unusual. It's disappointing to me that even people who are always talking about 'dance music' don't pick up on it."

Harrison's solo album was no whim. He had sketched out a couple of songs, working on ideas in his home studio, before the Heads started **Remain in Light**. When the band went on furlough last spring, Harrison decided to buckle down on the project rather than take on outside production jobs, as he had done (with Nona Hendryx, among others) the year before. After taping himself on most instruments he recruited cronies to add specific parts to the mix.

Now that he's tasted artistic freedom with **The Red and the Black**—the title "summed

up the emotions I had been feeling this last year"—Harrison claims he will be heard from again. Talking Heads had already garnered a local reputation when he joined them in New York five years ago; his prior experience with Jonathan Richman's Modern Lovers and non-founding status in the Heads have given Harrison a flexible attitude toward the future.

"I have never felt that things can't change. I've always been aware of the possibility that people will get to the point where they don't find it particularly profitable or exciting to work together anymore. Relationships break up, marriages break up and bands break up. It's not a negative thing necessarily, it's just a fact of life. I thought if that ever did happen [with Talking Heads] I didn't want to be in a position where I suddenly had nothing to do. This album certainly makes me confident of my abilities to do other things than be a supporting member in a band."

**HARRISON** isn't the only Talking Head with newfound confidence. "I think maybe Tina and I have a little more self-confidence than we did this time last year," Chris Frantz, master of understatement, suggests. For if Byrne and Harrison's LPs impressed on an artistic level, Frantz and Weymouth's **Tom Tom Club** (named after a rehearsal loft near Compass Point Studios in the Bahamas) achieved the trickier goal of tapping into black street music without any condescension. Their "Genius of Love" has received the ultimate accolade from New York's uptown crowd: its rhythm track was swiped as the basis of several rap versions (including their own).

Frantz, 31, and Weymouth, 30, are undoubtedly the best married rhythm section in rock. They must subscribe to the opposites-attract school: moptopped, paunchy and genial Frantz is content to lay back and roll joints while his svelte, voluble wife does most of the talking.

"It's a good thing I'm still in an unsuccessful band such as Talking Heads or I might get a swelled head," Weymouth jokes. Actually, Tom Tom Club's triumph is measurable more in terms of the tight-knit world of discos and rock clubs than the catholic record chart. They made a good impression in England with last summer's debut 45, "Wordy Rappinghood"; its follow-up, "Genius of Love," has more impressively been playlisted by WBLS-FM, one of New York's top-rated radio stations. "It's so exciting," Weymouth says. "You can't believe what it's like to have your song on radio. [She's right.] We were used to making songs and just accepting it as, 'Well, you're not gonna get played on radio.'"

Recognition never hurt, but Tom Tom Club—a very loose aggregation of 12, including session musicians Tyrone Downie, Monte Browne, Compass Point engineer Steven Stanley, the popular Belew and three of Weymouth's sisters—was born of more than a desire to get on radio.

"We hadn't really enjoyed ourselves with

music for a while," Frantz says. "Talking Heads is hard music; you don't just get up there and do your standard licks. Not that we were doing standard licks with Tom Tom Club, but we were doing something that to us was fun, amusing and easy in attitude instead of difficult. We had our ambitions, but it was mostly to enjoy ourselves."

"We didn't want to do snobbish music on Tom Tom Club," Weymouth adds. "Not to say anything bad about Eno, but whenever we'd do something great while working with him he'd say, 'No, that sounds too good.' If it sounds good it must be commercial, therefore it can't be art, therefore it must be bad. He wants you to have to listen real hard. I just don't go with that; saying 'this is revolutionary' is bullshit because all you can do is keep interpreting from your derivations, keep progressing in little ways—unless you want to invent the 12-tone scale all over again. Feeling is the most important thing."

At first Weymouth and Frantz didn't think of Tom Tom Club as an ongoing project. Weymouth says she wouldn't even have considered recording but for encouragement from added Heads Bernie Worrell, bassist Busta Cherry Jones and Belew. After signing with Island Records in England and scoring with "Wordy Rappinghood," Frantz and Weymouth had to battle Warner Bros. (Sire's owner) back home to release it in 12-inch form. They won, and "Wordy Rappinghood"—a nonstop tumble of wordplay with sing-song chorus—became Warner Bros.'s first commercially released 12-inch single. The slower, touching "Genius of Love" consolidated Tom Tom Club's reputation and led to a flurry of offers for live appearances. Their public debut is set for Japan in late April—opening for Talking Heads.

In common with the other Heads, Weymouth is very much an individualist. "We aren't Talking Heads between tours, although that's how people see you. When the band's not playing I don't want to be thought of as weird, as having problems. I don't like that identity. I don't think anyone in our band ever identified with it—and I never believed 'David Byrne is our leader' either, because that wasn't the case. When David gives orders all he does is make the whole thing stop. I appreciate that people recognize his talent, but it's pretty ironic when people come up to me and tell me, 'Don't you know what a genius he is?' I think, 'C'mon, I was with him six years ago when all of you were laughing at him!'"

The stigma of an art-school education hangs heavy on Frantz and Weymouth. (They met Byrne at the Rhode Island School of Design.) Their involvement with the anti-"art" Tom Tom Club has caused self-appointed guardians of rock culture to shake their heads in dismay—"like you're moronic or something," Weymouth says.

"I love it when college kids review Tom Tom Club," Frantz notes. "They just can't figure it out! They say, 'But Tina and Chris must be more ambitious than just to make a mere dance record!'" He laughs heartily. "We should give them a guitar and drums



and say, 'Here, make a mere dance record!'"

Weymouth concedes some shortcomings to Tom Tom Club: "We only worked hard on two songs ['Wordy Rappinghood' and 'Genius of Love'] to get them into shape." She also feels there were "not enough chord changes" and the production was hamstrung by a tight budget. Yet the last complaint inspired admiration from Byrne and Harrison. "They envied us because we brought the album in for half as much as either of theirs," Weymouth laughs.

**REST** assured: Like a feuding family united only against an outside intruder, Talking Heads are likely to be around for some time. "Talking Heads is a *great band*," Weymouth states loud and clear. "Maybe backstage there's some grumbling but onstage the band has always been in love with itself and each other. We never had nearly the problems that were reported."

Conversation with all four Heads yields a fractured consensus on what has been bugging them. The strain of touring took its toll (Weymouth: "There was no time to develop new ideas").

There was also the **Remain in Light** credits caper. Upon its release the album bore the legend "All songs written by David Byrne, Brian Eno and Talking Heads." The band didn't care to be relegated to the role of back-up musicians.

"Everyone felt at times that they'd somehow been slighted," Harrison says. "Brian

did at one point and David did at another." "On some songs I thought people probably contributed things that weren't acknowledged," Byrne acknowledges. "There's no way it could have been worked out so everyone felt it was fair, because of the way that record was made—people switching instruments and all that. No matter how it was worded somebody was going to lose out."

"Wanna know what happened?" the feisty Weymouth asks. "We took a vote and decided we'd all written stuff; all five names were supposed to go on. Then when the test pressing cover came back there were only two names. We raised a stink about it and David took the blame. About two years later I found out Eno pushed him to do it."

Unlike an adoring public, Weymouth doesn't have a very high opinion of Eno. She implies he was the Heads' prime irritant—an unfortunate state of affairs if true, as Eno produced all but the first of Talking Heads' albums.

"When we started working together," Weymouth says, "he was really interested in seeing how we could make pop songs, hit songs for radio. It was at the same time Robert Fripp was doing disco records with Blondie. They were really trying to achieve something. Then when they didn't achieve it they just said, 'Oh, that's trash.'"

"I hated the press release that was sent out with **Remain in Light**—this little artistic statement about how it came about [*mock-pompous tones*]: 'We read these books and we decided to play African.' I didn't read those books!"

"I didn't either and I played all the drums," Frantz volunteers.

"I said, 'This is bullshit, Eno,'" Weymouth picks up. "You should just do interviews with *Artforum* and forget the pop world."

"We never said 'the band's breaking up' to each other. The problem went away because Eno went away."

Brian Eno will not be producing the new Talking Heads studio LP—"by mutual consent," according to Byrne. "We all feel it's time to try something different than what we tried on the last three records. There's no hard feelings." "Change for change's sake" is Harrison's explanation.

Change also seems to be in the air for the Heads' music. "Our initial idea is to work with something closer to traditional song form," Byrne says—"a melody with chord changes and choruses. None of us really did that on our solo albums and Talking Heads haven't done it for a couple of years. But we're bound to botch that up and mutate it in some way."

"One of the things we've always tried to do in Talking Heads," Harrison says, "is allow a certain amount of space for the people involved so we can remain together. I really look forward to the next record."

That Talking Heads remain together—and holding "great" rehearsals, according to Weymouth—says more about the state of the band than any internecine squabbling. Byrne reluctantly agrees to the concept of the group as an open marriage: "Yeah, it seems to have worked out OK."

He almost sounds surprised.

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